

"THE WAY OF THE WORLD IS TO BLOOM AND FLOWER AND DIE":
THE PALINDROME OF KNOWING IN CORMAC
MCCARTHY'S THE ROAD

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Art
in English

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

May 2011

ABSTRACT

Meaning has been the topic of much commentary on Cormac McCarthy's work. Critics posit an array of conclusions about meaning in his corpus, ranging from its impossibility to its excess. Much work concludes that if meaning exists, it is generated from an interplay between the natural world that McCarthy describes in his work and the characters who interact with it. With *The Road*, McCarthy offers his clearest presentation of meaning as it pertains to human knowing. In this presentation, McCarthy explores knowing through a beginning-in-ending, or palindromic scheme; he arrives at the origins of knowing by reaching its terminus mirror. The scheme of *The Road* involves the idea of negative knowledge, which involves the process of unknowing former realities. This process is outworked by the novel's father, who must unlearn the functionality of a social object-world that had been decimated by an apocalyptic event. McCarthy shows the father and his son entering dwellings and using the objects they find in them to depict this negative knowing, as he employs the literal road as a conduit of knowing; it is the channel that brings the two into contact with knowable things. By the novel's end, the father's mode of knowing loses its functionality, which is symbolized by the road's failure to bring the two into contact with dwellings. Through this, McCarthy indicates that human knowing and meaning has been refigured, its new form embodied in the son.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: KNOWING ON THE ROAD

Every Night & Every Morn
Some to Misery are Born.
Every Morn & every Night
Some are Born to sweet delight
Some are Born to sweet delight,
Some are Born to Endless Night.
-William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence"

Cormac McCarthy is a writer whose work is as much philosophy as it is story, research as it is fiction, and he fuses such elements in a way that makes them difficult to distinguish, a method intrinsic to his writ. With his latest novel, *The Road*, McCarthy envisions a world that is seemingly the stuff of imagination. The opening scene reveals a post-apocalyptic setting and recounts the dream of a monster lumbering off into the darkness of a cave. But this embryo of imagination becomes imbued with McCarthy's meticulous research, work he aims at a central investigation of human understanding.

The above poem by Blake is an apt summary of understanding in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*; traditional binaries are seen to share a temporal locus. In the poem, contrasting worlds of misery and delight have their common provenance in "Morn" or "Night," two temporal descriptors that are used interchangeably. In *The Road*, the post apocalyptic world of a literal "Endless Night" is one seemingly contrary to the world that birthed it. However, the idea of "beginning," one that could be associated with delight, finds itself asymptotically returning, the term "ending" indicating its obverse. *The Road* depicts the relationship of a father and son to associate misery with delight and essentially reduce such differentiation to mere abstraction generated by human interaction with objects. Thus, the meaning humans know grows out of the things they experience.

Most critics who have addressed the novel to date have at least touched the ideas of human knowing that are depicted in *The Road*, and there are three basic responses: (1) meaning persists, (2) meaning fails, (3) regardless of the first two, meaning changes drastically. Ashley Kunsu aligns with the first camp and argues that the novel “is best understood as a linguistic journey toward redemption, a search for meaning and pattern in a seemingly meaningless world – a search that, astonishingly, succeeds” (59). Lydia Cooper similarly asserts that the father “must preserve human goodness by turning his son into a messianic moral compass” (156) which would require an intact structure of meaning and knowing to pass on to his son. Rune Graulund argues for the second camp and believes that memories for the father become “a dangerous distraction from the one thing that truly matters: the present survival of his boy” (66) and that “everything eventually dissolves into meaninglessness and nothingness” (67). Alex Hunt and Martin Jacobsen concur with Graulund in their Platonic reading of the story as they conclude two key dream passages to represent a retreat of light and forms from humanity, thus implying the end of knowledge. Shelly Rambo exemplifies the third understanding in exploring the idea of redemption in *The Road*. She concludes that human knowing has drastically shifted whether it is truly doomed or not. “In the aftermath of the collapse of the world, there is no end in sight, no destination, and no promise of life ahead.... Instead of leading to a redemptive ending, it may provide a necessary disruption of that familiar framework and reorientation to life as a *living on*” (115). Anthony Warde also finds a synthesis between meaning and no-meaning camps: “While the future of the man and boy’s sensory world seems to be largely dependent upon the dwindling leftovers of a consumer culture whose alienation from nature has become total and irreversible, the past

continues to provide a space in which the senses and the world interact with and impact upon one another” (134). With such varied responses centered on knowing, it is hardly a fruitless task to give specific attention to McCarthy’s outworking of human knowledge and its function in the novel.

In *The Road*, a palling world becomes the setting that bears Cormac McCarthy’s tabulation of human knowledge. It is a realm that greets his characters with basic harshness; breathing is perilous without masks, and what little there is to eat may be poisoned. Yet, while McCarthy relates both a coming of age tale and survival epic, such critical response suggests that *The Road* is primarily a story about meaning. Its presentation of a depleted post-apocalyptic landscape is a perverse return to the origins of both nature and human thought. To explore how meaning is generated between nature and man, McCarthy strips the physical world of *The Road* down to its most fundamental elements in order to find a beginning in an end, to get to a point mirroring the process’ genesis. McCarthy’s contemplation is akin to the novel’s father character: “[P]erhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be” (*TR* 274). So McCarthy explores what Billy Parham is told cannot be done in *The Crossing*:

Nothing can be dispensed with. Nothing despised. Because the seams are hid from us, you see. The joinery. The way in which the world is made. We have no way to know what could be taken away. What omitted. We have no way to tell what might stand and what might fall. And those seams that are hid from us are of course in the tale itself and the tale has

no abode or place of being except in the telling only and there it lives and makes its home and therefore we can never be done with the telling. (143)

The father and his son, as they journey along the road, reenact a construction/deconstruction of meaning, as both ponder and learn how to interact with the objects, materials, and humans that they come across in their distorted phenomenal realm where the “seams” are not only exposed, but unraveling.

The literal road figures as a conduit of knowing, one that is intact in both pre and post-apocalyptic worlds of *The Road*, though slowly deteriorating without human maintenance. The general idea of a road entails an interconnectedness of a complex web of navigable courses that effectively map and conquer the geography of the land. *The Crossing*, to return to McCarthy’s Border Trilogy centerpiece, provides a compendium of what the “road” means in the fiction of McCarthy:

The road has its own reason and no two travelers will have the same understanding of those reasons. If indeed they come to an understanding of them at all.... Perhaps it is true that nothing is hidden. Yet many do not wish to see what lies before them in plain sight. You will see. The shape of the road is the road. There is not some other road that wears that shape but only the one. And every voyage begun upon it will be completed. (230)

Understanding is at the center of traveling the road, and this understanding is linked to “what lies before” travelers “in plain sight,” the things left standing.

This road, figured as an expansive and complex system that the father needs a map to navigate, links its infinity of points. In a sense it even bridges the

phenomenological gulf between the world of before and the one of after, performing a function similar to that of memory. The journey that father and son undertake is one along a system of knowing that continues to operate in spite of the severely corroded world that houses it. Later in the novel, as the two near a city, they come across “the possessions of travelers abandoned in the road years ago. Boxes and bags. Everything melted and black... curled shapeless in the heat. Here and there the imprint of things wrested out of the tar by scavengers” (190). This juxtaposed with the boy’s response “What you put in your head is there forever?” (190) to his father’s advice to look away from the gruesome scene, compares the operation of road with the mind, bearing imprints of things absent.

In her essay “Cormac McCarthy: Itinerant Acts and Becoming Maps,” Jessica Datema calls these absent things the “unconscious refuse of language.” She explains: “The characters wander down what Sigmund Freud calls the ‘royal road’ of dreams... which is a non-patriarchal story preserving the unconscious refuse of language. In *The Road* a father and son’s journey delimits fantasy to engage the real” (133). It is a bridge that unites the cleaved phenomenal worlds of pre and post, fantasy and real, and the mode that the father uses to re-order or re-map meaning, or at least a structure of knowing, from his old world onto the new world that his son will inherit.

But the question remains as to whether or not this post-world can bear any sort of impression. Is there a world left to know? Inger-Anne Søvting writes: “All of Cormac McCarthy’s novels are unmistakably and significantly from a specific region of the US. Landscape and the natural surroundings are imprinted like a signature on their discourse” (14). While arguments are made as to the specific region and journey depicted in *The*

Road,¹ McCarthy situates this story in a world where places' fundamentally distinguishing features are disintegrating. Rune Graulund describes the novel to be "[s]et in an unclear future and an unspecified region of America, [and] is thus immediately different when seen in the light of McCarthy's former four decades of writing. Not only is it the first of his novels to be detached entirely from history, it also breaks with his famous attention to place" (58-9). Thus the attention given to landscape or place by McCarthy in *The Road*, has shifted from his earlier works.

Anthony Warde argues: "*The Road* asserts a more holistic human or *sensuous* geography, a manner of constructing space that highlights the interaction (and interdependence) of the human body and its surrounding land" (125). Rather than specific landscapes "imprinting signatures" in *The Road*, McCarthy uses more general natural descriptions consisting of basic topographic features. "A raw hill country.... that cauterized terrain" (14), "scavenged bowl of the countryside" (19), "broad lowland river valley" (21), and "that high world" (31) to describe mountain travel, are typical descriptors for the "regions" through which the two travel. Graulund points out: "the scenery of *The Road* is drab. In the place of stunning colors and extraordinary topography, a wall of grey greets the reader, a monochrome and 'wasted country' where all that moves is the 'ashes of the late world'" (60).

Such "monochrome" detail emphasizes man's interaction with the land surrounding him as a universal effort to survive. Regional description in the road resists particularity, even when it seems specific like a barn bearing the advertisement "See Rock City" (21), because survival off the land has lost regional uniqueness. All plants

¹ See Wes Morgan's "The Route and Roots of *The Road*"

and animals have perished, even climate is more homogenous, so there are no unique harvests or hunts, simply none at all. But despite their generality, “regions” vaguely remain in *The Road*. “The landscape is in *The Road* an extreme of both presence and absence, more dominant than ever in McCarthy’s authorship while paradoxically also the vaguest” (Graulund 59), and this is to indicate that as long as there are people to go places and places to go, the road will bring anyone into contact with what is along it.

Apart from the obvious title, McCarthy signifies the importance of the road by ascribing to it far more descriptive words than for any other thing detailed in the work. It is true that this is in part due to the narrative focus sustained throughout the novel, but the function of the words selected to present the road is telling. There is an array of words used to describe the road, and there are at least two categories in which to place them. The first consists of material descriptors such as blacktop, pavement, macadam, and mastic. The second is comprised of words describing the function, or type of roadway such as highway, interstate, pike, and state road.

“Blacktop”² (4) is the first descriptor used for the road: “The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop.” It is a common enough term used to describe practically any tar-based road surface. But why not say instead “highway,” or “road’s surface”? The important feature is that “blacktop” describes not only the road’s appearance, but also the material with which it is made. This places significance on the road’s composition, and is noteworthy since it persists while so much else of man’s constructed world does not. In a discussion between father and son the two speak of the roads on which they travel: “But the roads are still there. Yes. For a while. How long a while? I don’t know. Maybe quite a

² John Sepich finds that “blacktop” was used to describe the road eight times in the novel. See “A Concordance to *The Road* – 287 numbered pages”

while. There's nothing to uproot them so they should be okay for a while" (43). So the road's composition is not only durable, but a crippled nature is also no longer well equipped to combat such structure imposed on it. What was a dialogue between man and nature becomes a soliloquy, and it is the road's material persistence that allows man to travel and know that he is, in fact, alone amongst the refuse of language.

The capability of the road as such is indicated by the father's recollection of discarding his wallet: "Some money, credit cards. His driver's license. A picture of his wife. He spread everything out on the blacktop.... He stood and they went on" (51). These constructed objects, more conceptual than concrete, are what he leaves on the blacktop, while tossing his wallet, "the sweatblackened piece of leather into the woods." This scene is suggesting a connection between the father's memory and the blacktop itself. The wallet is an object that has undergone a simple transformation from cowhide to holder, while money, credit cards, and pictures are objects imbued with layers of abstraction. The defunct wallet is pitched into the arms of a deceased nature while the abstract items, equally useless, remain on the blacktop where the particulars will fade, but not be forgotten to the father as money, credit cards, and a picture. Just like the items wrenched from the road whose imprints were left in its tar, their particulars will be lost, but their generality or form remains, understood or not by those who may pass.

The road, then, is a channel bearing the remains of human movement, which is associated with memory and the reaches of human experience. Slavoj Žižek argues: "interpretation is the conclusive moment of the very act of reception" (*Everything* 1), thus figuring knowing as reception. Where the road ends, so does man's phenomenal interaction. When the father and son come "to a broad tidal river where the bridge lay

collapsed in the slow moving water” they must stop. “They sat on the *broken abutment* of the road and watched the river backing upon itself and coiling over the iron trelliswork” (275 *Italics mine*). The stuff of the road must be durable, just like human memory. The two perform similar functions in that they associate a nearly infinite web of disparate elements, but it is only at the moment of re-traveling or remembering (or reaching for the first time) that knowing occurs. At this juncture the father can only look “across the water to the country beyond,” but without the road to bear him across, he cannot tabulate what is there. As Judge Holden proclaims in *Blood Meridian*: “Even in this world more things exist without your knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way” (245). The road is an incomprehensible network until it has been traveled, until a string has been laid. It then bears human knowing along its durable blacktop.

Besides these words describing composition, McCarthy employs a number of different terms to present the roadway’s functions. The two of particular interest are “state roads” and “pike” because these are the two specifically mentioned that the duo travel (the other descriptors depict the roadways they do not use). The father, in teaching his son how to read their road map says: “These are our roads, the black lines on the map. The state roads” (42). It is perhaps the father’s intention to use these roads because he thinks they will be less traveled, but there is also the abstract idea of “state” that becomes important. Obviously, all roadways have their origins in the pre-apocalypse, but “state road” bears in its title an explicit link to the abstract world predating the apocalypse. The fact that these roads are the roads that the father describes as “our roads,” and that it does not appear that the two travel on any other type of roadway, indicates the father’s desire

to retain pre-apocalypse concepts, and more importantly, the necessity of setting these roads apart in order that his son recognize and read them on the map. Without such a distinction, the boy could not see their place on the map “that answered to their location” (42), and would effectively be lost. So one reason McCarthy has the two traveling state roads is because they still depend on the pre-apocalyptic world to position them spatially.

Another is the act of repetition. Bill Brown argues: “repetition is the mode of becoming historical; alternatively, we know people through their repetitions” (*A Sense of Things* 73). The act of exclusively traveling state roads is a repetitive act, but beyond this, as will be further detailed later, the father is re-traveling routes he had taken as a child. As he repeats this journey, the road allows him to simultaneously show his son the mode of history and reveal his own history, stopping at childhood places of interest that include the home of his youth. Brown continues by summarizing Deleuz: “Repetition... must be differentiated from abstraction, and thus from modes of iterative narrations; the reenactment of ‘non-substitutable singularities’ is irreducible ‘to all forms of generality,’ which always obscure the play of differences in the return of the same” (73). Thus, the father is making his non-substitutable life a concrete thing to his son through repetition, differentiating it from abstractions like “state,” a generalization far removed from its tangible origins.

Therefore, the two concretize the abstractions from the former world that appear on their map as they travel the road in a reversal of pre-apocalyptic activity. While their navigational capacity is indeed indebted to the previous world, the previous world was indebted to just such concrete endeavors as their traveling in order to generate a primary map. This is pertinent in relation to the father and son traveling a “pike” since the word

connotes the idea of a toll. This comes at a point when “[t]hey studied the pieces of map but he’d little notion of where they were. He stood at a rise in the road and tried to take his bearings in the twilight. They left the pike and took a narrow road through the country” (126). Leaving the pike is symbolic of diverging from the abstract; they owe no abstract debt to a road for which an abstract map will not answer.

Consequently, the type of material with which roads are constructed and the type of roadway on which father and son travel serves to emphasize the concrete nature of knowing in their apocalyptic world over the abstract character of knowing in the pre-apocalyptic world. The burden of *The Road*, then, is two-fold as it seeks to explore the ultimate bifurcation of the phenomenal world. The post-apocalyptic world that the father and son traverse sets up an array of binaries, such as concrete/abstract, that bracket a space between our known phenomenological world, and the ultimate terminus of history. The symbols of arrowheads in juxtaposition with a coin is another poignant example similar to the state roads the two travel that present a split between concrete and abstract and marks a sharp disintegration of former modes of meaning and knowing. Up to the point of the apocalyptic event, humanity had built context and meaning in an assumed cooperation with the natural world, while after the event, as nature and humanity slowly perish, all that had been constructed crumbles at a painfully protracted rate. The two-fold burden of *The Road*, is to inform beginning with end and end with beginning through a process of negative knowing, and this is made possible by the novel’s assumed stability or persistence of knowing, albeit the shifting stability implied by the passages from *The Crossing*. Such is encapsulated by the symbolic journey of father and son, and the objects they encountered during it further elucidate beginning/ending and concrete/abstract.

CHAPTER II

OBJECT USE/MISUSE

“[W]e are not to philosophize about concrete things; we are to philosophize, rather, out of these things.” -Theodore Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

“We shall not, therefore, be concerning ourselves with objects as defined by their functions or by the categories into which they might be subdivided for analytic purposes, but instead with the processes whereby people relate to them and with the systems of human behaviour and relationships that result therefrom” –Jean Baudrillard *The System of Objects*

1. OBJECTS

It is through the depiction of object-use along the road that McCarthy probes the striking dimidiation that the novel presents. David Holloway’s explanation of *Blood Meridian*’s “optical democracy,” is a helpful place to begin this discussion.

Optical democracy is a resistance of the simulacrum by way of the simulacrum itself. It is a simulated retrieval of “natural” meaning in objects, by a language that takes into account and then reprivileges the discrete, particular differences that exist in the world of nature, and the world of physical objects generally, as well as in the words that we draw upon in order to think and represent that object world back to ourselves. In emphasizing these discrete differences, McCarthy presents us with a fictive world where the narrated objects, and the words that signify them, glow with a life of their own, with a kind of self-definition on their own terms, with a unique particularity among whatever other objects and words accrue in any given scene. (*The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* 168-69)

In the depleted world, those objects that father and son use both lose and gain functionality in that they previously depended on not only more abstract social constructions of use and exchange, but also a created system of objects that was decimated by the apocalyptic event. Baudrillard explains that nature is

the original substance from which value is derived. In creating or manufacturing objects, man makes himself, through the imposition of a form (i.e. through culture), into the transubstantiator of nature. It is the passing down of substances from age to age, from form to form, which supplies the archetype of creativity... and the whole poetic and metaphorical symbolic system that goes with it. (27)

The father and son find themselves in a world where nature is vanishing, taking with it substance and form. A telling description of this in *The Road* is a scene where the two characters stand on the beach when they first arrive at the ocean, the goal of their journey. They see the old world's

[c]harred and *senseless artifacts* strewn down the shoreline or rolling in the surf.... We're beachcombers, he said. What is that? It's people who walk along the beach looking for *things of value* that might have washed up. What kind of *things*?.... *Anything* you might be able to *use*" (220, *Italics mine*).

With only the father's memories of social meaning and a minimally operative "system" of objects, father and son employ items primarily as their circumstances dictate, operating with "unique particularity" as opposed to the directives of any pre-existing social material scheme. Father and son "think and represent" their object-world back to themselves in

circumstances that are unique and hardly relatable to the pre-apocalypse. For instance, a grocery cart loses its societal function as conveyer within the confines of a store, and to the duo becomes an essential object for transporting their necessities along the road.

In her anthropological/archeological study of Mesoamerica, Julia Hendon expands on this idea:

Material objects are physically separate or separable from us, have a period of existence different from our own, and possess properties that we experience and that somehow contribute to people's ability to remember and forget. They are sometimes objects, sometimes subjects as they become part of the process of creating persons and a sense of self. (*Houses in a Landscape: Memory and Everyday Life in Mesoamerica* 67)

The Road depicts father and son to be two very different people as their knowledge of self has been formed by entirely contrasting object-worlds.

Observations on the functionality of objects and material in McCarthy's work have been made by several critics, notably David Holloway in his work *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* and Raymond Malewitz in his essay " 'Anything Can Be an Instrument' ": Misuse Value and Rugged Consumerism in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*." While both readings tend to emphasize a Marxist understanding of use and exchange value, Malewitz makes a further distinction in "intended use value," calling into question "the practical result of social conventions that sanction certain use values for certain objects" (724). Malewitz, by way of Bill Brown's study of American material culture, *A Sense of Things*, concludes: "the daily habits that give form and sense to our perception operate as cognitive buffers that allow us to see things only as socially

constructed objects” (725). Umberto Eco, in *Role of the Reader*, enforces this idea, saying that a

sign-function correlates a given expression to a given content. This content has been defined by a given culture irrespective of whether a given state of the world corresponds to it. ‘Unicorn’ is a sign as well as is ‘dog’. The act of mentioning, or of referring to, them is made possible by some indexical devices, and ‘dog’ can be referred to an individually existent object whereas ‘unicorn’ cannot. (179)

Both Malewicz and Eco assert a malleability of use that is hidden by rigid social dictates that confine a specific object to a specific function. As Eco points out, the content of “unicorn” is entirely populated with cultural definition since in the “given state of the world” “unicorn” does not correspond to an existent object. What both discussions entail is that the socially constructed function of a unicorn is as imaginary as the unicorn itself, which would inevitably extend to the socially “fixed” functions of actual objects as imagined or created and certainly not static.

Martin Buber describes the use of objects from their most primal origins to show that function is not fixed: “Every change made in the stuff of things which is intended to make them more suitable for fulfilling a purpose, every strengthening and refining, every differentiation and combination, every technique is built on this elementary basis – that a person sets aside something which he finds, and makes it into something for itself” (65). Bill Brown explains that “something for itself” is “Identity [which] depends less on authorized value and function, more on recognition and use,” as he cites the concrete example from Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper* that depicts pauper guised as prince

using the Great Seal to crack nuts, completely unaware of the object's "authorized" use value. So, while an insular adherence to social understanding of objects could be lethal to characters in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* for example, it is understandable that Malewitz would assert such a limited understanding of object-function to be lacking at the very least.

2. MISUSE

The Road sophisticates notions of object-function further. McCarthy depicts an understanding of "intended" use to be necessary, but asserts the removal, or "misuse" of such socially enforced understandings to be possibly lethal. Four scenes serve as aids to introduce *The Road*'s portrayal of object use, two representing Malewitz's "misuse" and two that promote at least the ability to read socially constructed use-value. One of the more poignant illustrations of misuse finds father and son on the verge of starvation. The two enter a house along the road, and on the floor of one room "was a door or hatch locked with a large padlock made of steel plates" (108). Upon breaking through this makeshift obstacle in a desperate search for food, the father "crouched... and held out the light. Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide.... On a mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous" (110). The two had stumbled upon a human crop that was imprisoned by the crudely effective manipulation of steel plates into the object of a lock. Certainly this deviation from a pre-apocalypse understanding of steel plates was highly functional, but also represents an aberrance that in no circumstance is inherently positive, thus explaining the phrase in Malewitz's title "Misuse Value."

Another harrowing scene that details a marauding tribe of cannibals helps to

explain *The Road's* formulation of this "misuse value." The father

woke in the morning... in time to see the marchers appear four abreast. Dressed in clothing of every description, all wearing red scarves at their necks. Red or orange, as close to red as they could find.... He wallowed into the ground and lay watching across his forearm. An army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. Lanyards at the wrist. Some of the pipes were threaded through with lengths of chain fitted at their ends with every manner of bludgeon. They clanked past, marching with a swaying gate like wind-up toys.... The phalanx following carried spears or lances tasseled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings in some crude forge upcountry.... Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harnesses and piled with goods of war and after that the women..., and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each. (91-2)

In this description, the marauders have crafted an array of objects into specific tools of battle, fitted "with every manner of bludgeon," others "hammered from trucksprings in some crude forge" into "spears or lances." A useful passage for explanation here is Eco's dissection of an object in terms of how its function can be read.

Using a knife as instrument, I can kill someone, but what about the semantic representation of *knife*? It seems that ... it could be useful in this case to employ such categories as *who produces* it, *with what material*, according to *what formula rule* and for *what purpose*. This kind of

representation recalls the four Aristotelian causes... but the representation of an 'object' could also be transformed into the representation of the action required to produce this object (therefore: not *knife* but *to make a knife*). (177-8)

Eco's understanding, like Buber's, is similar to Walter Benjamin's notion that "the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to the history which it has experienced" (221). Essential in each understanding is the attempt to describe how objects can be known by reading the conditions that have shaped them. The narrator of this scene shows the father to follow suit by processing his situation through Eco's scheme, identifying the "who" to be an "army," the material to be "three-foot lengths of pipe" and "trucksprings," the formula of production to be "some crude forge," and "bludgeon" indicates these objects' purpose. Such a categorical evaluation presented by the scene's narrator, allows the father to quickly ascertain the function of the odd array of objects in those menacing hands.

Also pertinent in this scene is McCarthy hearkening back to ancient Greek military terminology by using the word "phalanx" to describe the marchers. This indicates notions of transgression and violence leveled at the perverse use of objects, specifically focusing on the catamite prisoners, while accentuating the perverse with the altered spellings of "illclothed" and "dogcollars." Brown points out: "'Unnatural' use, uncustomary use, is what... discloses the composition of objects. Forced to use a knife as a screwdriver, you achieve a new recognition of its thinness, its hardness, the shape and size of the handle" (78). Here, rather than an organized installment of Greek warriors bearing the imprint of a highly developed and civilized culture, a phalanx is comprised by

a savage tribe that physically consumes “culture,” thus removing any notion that “phalanx” intrinsically bears with it ideas of civilized antiquity.

The same is true of the term “catamite,” which, as an ancient Greek understanding would have it, was not solely sexual. Margueritte Johnson writes:

Erotic relations between males were part of the educational process in many Greek societies.... Idealised depictions... portray a careful courtship, in which the *pais* proved himself appropriately chaste and somewhat cautious, before the relationship progressed along spiritual and intellectual lines with *erastes* instructing the youth in matters ranging from philosophy to the citizen’s role in serving the state. The relationship between *erastes* and *eromenos* may thus be interpreted as part of the process of transforming a boy into a man. (*Sexuality in Greek and Roman Society and Literature*, 4)

It entailed a rite of passage for a young boy into manhood and military service by way of an older man’s affections that included education and gifts. This scene is one of many that, as Brown puts it, dislocates us from “the physical object, the physical world, confronts us with its alterity, not as a thing come-to-life but as an utterly familiar thing that can suddenly feel life-threatening” (80). Thus, as with understandings of “phalanx,” the lavish concepts that “catamite” entailed in its original context are stripped away and replaced by their inverse. Rather than gifts and feasting, they are “illclothed” and imprisoned, and the situation implied by “catamite” becomes threatening rather than opulent.

Such threat or dislocation forces the father and son to see things as having much

more potential than familiarity with objects might lead them to believe. Datema observes this dislocation and argues: “In making room for the chaotic and chiasmic, characters in *The Road* construct a supplemental genealogy.... The journey proceeds to show survival as a supplemental way of existing... on an abject frontier” (141). Similar to Brown, she understands: “The real is what interrupts on the automatic path of life, which is our limited and determined perception” (140). Slavoj Zizek, in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* adds that this appearance of the real is “a fantasmatic spectre whose presence guarantees the consistency of our symbolic edifice, thus enabling us to avoid confronting its constitutive inconsistency (‘antagonism’)” (32). With the marauders of *The Road* depicted to be “dressed in clothes of every description.... with a swaying gate like windup toys” while brandishing sinister weapons, they become that “fantasmatic spectre” Zizek figures as the Real, which appears along Datema’s “automatic path of life.”

Thus, the scene here is one of ironic guarantee, the Real forces father and son to undertake their quest to reach the ocean, the quest being their “symbolic edifice.” They are trying to “avoid confronting” the “constitutive inconsistency” posed by the Real in their “supplemental way of existing” through survival. Because of the marauders’, or the Real’s, disregard of social object-function, the indication is that this same disregard applies to any notion of “social,” since such is a human construct meant to keep the Real at bay. Therefore, this depiction of a centripetal relationship between these object-makers and the humans forced to succumb, portrays the Real as opening ever wider and diminishing ontological/existential possibilities for the world’s dwindling population. It is the road that enables father and son to navigate this Baudrillardian “desert of the Real.” On a more concrete level, it is evident in these two scenes that deviation from typical

societal modes of object use, while still “readable,” may indicate transgression against humanity. So the implications of breaking from “intended use,” seen above with the steel-plate lock and the “dogcollars,” hold potentially dire consequences. As in the discovery of the human crop, the re-structured system of objects in and around the cannibals’ house pointed to the father and son’s ultimate finding long before they broke through the hatch. However, “All these things [the father] saw and did not see” (109).

Holloway would add:

[w]e cannot imagine ourselves in a position on the ‘outside’ of any given situation, so as to seize and oppose it intellectually or aesthetically, and we certainly cannot transcend or overcome that situation, when the truth value of the language or interpretive mechanism by which we might seek to grasp it is always deferred or absent” (*Late Modernism* 21-22).

The father’s difficulty was partially due to the fact that the primal need of hunger was distracting him, but also because the use of these objects did not align with his primary social lexicon, which would be his understandable default in such a frantic state of survival. The father must interact with this world as an outsider, a world constantly deferring his “interpretive mechanism.”

3. USE

Yet, the father’s outside reading of object-function through this pre-apocalyptic lexicon also saves the duo’s lives in *The Road*. Shortly after a narrow escape from another group of cannibals, the father searches a farmhouse for potential resources and discovers a cistern because he is able to “read” the function of a socially constructed object-system. The father

stood looking at the house.... The drainpipe ran down the corner of the porch.... The pipe came down the corner post and into a concrete tank. He brushed away the trash and rotted bits of screening from the cover. He went back into the kitchen and got the broom and came out and swept the cover clean and set the broom in the corner and lifted the cover from the tank. Inside was a tray filled with a wet gray sludge from the roof mixed with a compost of dead leaves and twigs. He lifted out the tray and set it in the floor. Underneath was white gravel. He scooped back the gravel with his hand. The tank beneath was filled with charcoal, pieces burned out of whole sticks and limbs in carbon effigies of the trees themselves. He put the tray back. In the floor was a green brass ringpull. He reached and got the broom and swept away the ash. There were sawlines in the boards. He swept the boards clean and knelt hooking his fingers in the ring and lifted the trap door and swung it open. Down there in the darkness was a cistern filled with water so sweet he could smell it.... He lay there a long time, lifting the water to his mouth.... Nothing in his memory anywhere of anything so good. (*TR* 122-23)

The father is able to recognize the function of a constructed system of objects because of his observations of its operation, or history as Benjamin would have it, prior to the apocalyptic event.

Dianne Luce confirms the father's "reading" here to represent a primary concern for McCarthy, as she describes his interest to "involve observation and experience, a sharp eye for the realities of nature, the tools and crafts of human endeavor, and the

nuances of human interaction” (vii). Thus the interplay between experience and observation, as well as between crafted tools and nature found in *The Road* can be figured as outworkings of McCarthy’s “vision concerning humanity’s understanding of its very nature” (Luce vii), and becomes representative of McCarthy’s work as a whole. Siân Jones, in a study on archeological authenticity (which will be important later in father and son’s interaction with buildings), describes this process or interplay as Eco and Benjamin might. It depends

upon people’s ability to establish relationships with objects, and the networks of people and places they have been associated with during their unique cultural biographies. The materiality of objects is crucial here, as is some form of physical contact or intimate experience of them. This is not to do with their origins, material, form or provenance in a materialist sense, but rather because the materiality of objects embodies the past experiences and relationships that they have been part of, and facilitates some kind of ineffable contact with those experiences and relationships. (189-90)

As such, this process is one the son probably could not have understood since he would not have had any intimate experience with a pre-apocalyptic system, though he clearly understands the danger of the previous two situations: “Papa, the boy said. We should go. Papa” (108). Since his experience primarily consists of intimate contact with things deadly, it is understandable that the boy “reads” more quickly than his father because he does not have to translate from a pre-apocalyptic lexicon to a post-apocalyptic one.

Because of this, the father’s lexical fluidity is at once a strength and weakness but,

as Luce indicates, the father's understanding is not limited to manmade objects from pre or post-apocalypse; it entails an understanding of such objects in cooperation with the "natural" world. The constructed parts in the previous scene cooperate to capture, filtrate, and store water, the natural resource that ultimately spares the lives of father and son. Later in the book, a scene much less complex in its human-object interaction with nature nearly inverts the harmony enacted between object-function and nature in the father's discovery of the cistern.

In this later instance, the father had just ransacked a capsized yacht while his son stood guard on the beach with their pistol. After collecting goods from the boat, the two start back towards their camp, a tent constructed from a tarp. "We're going to eat well tonight. But we need to get a move on. I'm hurrying papa. And it may rain. How can you tell? I can smell it" (232). After a good distance, the father realizes that his son had left the pistol in the sand by the boat, and the two have to return, the father understanding the perils of impending rain and darkness. Upon fetching the pistol and turning again towards their camp, night does catch the two, and they have no way of finding their camp in utter blackness. Then rain begins, and their lives are in danger from hypothermia. But "[t]hen in a shift in the wind he heard a distant faint patter. He stopped. Listen, he said.... What is it, Papa? It's the tarp. It's the rain falling on the tarp" (235-6). In this case, the father understands the object of the tarp to be performing its intended function of shielding water when he hears the rain pattering off of the plastic, and this nature-object interaction saves the two. Interestingly, the rain whose water collected by the cistern saves their lives earlier, threatens the two here. It is an interaction between a created object and a potentially threatening nature that once again spares their lives.

These four scenes depict two drastically contrasting approaches to object-function/use. The father and son represent two of only a handful of characters in the novel who are “good guys,” which, according to the father, are the ones who “keep trying. They don’t give up” (*TR* 137). However, the vast majority are “bad guys.” At first consideration, the differentiation between the two is the simple fact that the good guys don’t eat people and the bad guys do. This is an accurate observation, but does not arrive at the true complexity of the difference. While each group bends object use for their own needs, the above scenes exemplify “bad guys” as a-social consumers and “good guys” as supplemental survivors. While “bad guys” are seen to shape objects for brute consumption, an ironically self-canceling act, the “good guys” survive by using objects sustainably, recycling leftovers from the former world, reading the dwindling context and meaning that had been built from a cooperation between man and nature. As much is indicated in the boy’s prayer to the people whose fallout shelter the two find:

Dear People, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldnt eat it no matter how hungry we were and we’re sorry that you didnt get to eat it and we hope that you’re safe in heaven with God. (146)

There is certainly a notion of social ethics indicated by object-use that separates the “good” from the “bad.”

John Cant renders a useful reading that helps to make this distinction in his work *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. Cant discusses a scene where the father repairs their grocery cart:

They collected some old boxes and built a fire in the floor and he found

some tools and emptied out the cart and sat working on the wheel. He pulled the bolt and bored out the collet with a hand drill and resleeved it with a section of pipe he'd cut to length with a hacksaw. Then he bolted it all back together and stood the cart upright and wheeled it around the floor. It ran fairly true. The boy sat watching everything. (16-17)

Cant argues:

The care with which the actions are described matches the care taken over the actions themselves, a characteristic matching of style and meaning.

The wording is technical and accurate.... The effect of the passage is to divert the reader's mind from the anxiety generated through identification with the protagonists in the extremity of their plight, just as it diverts the minds of the characters themselves to be absorbed in practical activity. A further level of meaning is added by the final phrase. The watching boy is learning both practical and moral lessons by observing his father's endeavours. (275)

This scene and analysis depicts the constructive preservation of their miniature social unit as the father engages with pre-apocalyptic material structure and the son watches and learns.

Conversely, the misuse that the "bad guys" exemplify lies in their maligning of social objects that they ultimately use to control and destroy whatever notion of society remains. In his analysis of *The Road*, Thomas Carlson summarizes an understanding of humanity that Martin Heidegger details in *Being and Time*. This ultimately explains the difference between "use" and "misuse," as well as the "good" and "bad" in the novel.

Heidegger

sees a distinctive trait of human life in its capacity to lose itself, a distinctive human possession or property, as it were, in its capacity of dispossession or impropriety. Such a capacity for self-loss... involves both the unavoidable subjection of human life to trouble and disquiet, the human's 'becoming question' to itself, and the tendency of human life to flee such trouble and disquiet – to flee itself as question – by *absorbing and forgetting* itself, along with its troubled and questionable character.

(49)

The “bad guys” absorb and forget humanity by crafting objects that deliberately disregard cultural meaning for the sake of quite literally “absorbing” humanity through cannibalism. The “good guys” of father and son, though nomadic and elusive, “carry the fire” and use objects to preserve this “fire,” this miniature and fundamental social unit, “each the other’s world entire” (*TR* 3).

It is through this juxtaposition of society’s ontology, a comparison of how it used objects at its apogee and its beginning/ending, that McCarthy pursues an understanding of human knowledge itself. One of the more prominent figures of this ontological exploration is that of the house or dwelling. These are obviously powerful human creations, for as John Ruskin stresses in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*: “The greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold. Its glory is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, or mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the

passing waves of humanity” (233). Buildings present an invaluable material history, readable, as Eco, Benjamin, and Jones also demonstrate, through their histories.

The father and son’s journey includes six significant scenes in which such dwellings are entered and searched. The first is a search of a small country farmhouse, which serves to represent an anachronistic preservation of “home” and the material/objects that comprise such. The second is a visit to the father’s childhood home, which appeals to the pathos of the father and son, but to contrasting results. The third, and certainly the most harrowing instance in the novel, is the scavenging of the house that turns out to be the base of a cannibalistic gang. McCarthy, with this scene, dislocates a conventional set of binaries, utopia and inferno, by embedding a sense of Arcadia inside the chthonian, implying that the complete erosion of culture would defeat even death. As Ely, the only named character in the novel later says: “When we’re all gone at last then there’ll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too” (173). The fourth dwelling, which acts as the novel’s centerpiece, is a fallout shelter that is lavishly stocked with supplies from the old world. The fifth instance is the discovery of a southern mansion in the coastal plains of an ambiguous geographic location. The characters’ discovery of this dwelling speaks towards a decay of culture and history that points directly towards a fundamental mode of human knowing in the wake of the apocalypse. The concluding search, undertaken by the father alone, is of a Spanish yacht capsized off an unknown coast that relates to origins.

CHAPTER III

BEGINNING/ENDING *Via Negativa*

A careful examination of these scenes highlights the overarching concern of the novel that Luce noted, an interplay between experience and observation, nature and crafted objects, as they portray the necessity of reconstituting or refiguring meaning as a navigational tool in the phenomenal world. The father struggles to rework eroded meanings from his former life in order to piece together a semblance of order for his son in the midst of chaos. Wes Morgan argues in his essay “The Route and Roots of *The Road*” that the father takes a specific course to reach the ocean, one that was not geographically direct. Morgan believes the father to be retracing steps of his childhood rather than taking the fastest path.

It seems... that he had planned the trip through Knoxville, and nearby places, as a way of acquainting his son with his roots. There are personal references to the father's childhood experiences at Norris Dam watching a falcon (p. 17), at his family home in Knoxville remembering Christmas, the yellow brick hearth, and his childhood dreams (pp. 21-23), looking into a pool below a stone bridge in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park where he had watched the trout's shadow on the stones beneath them (p. 25), and at Newfound Gap where he once stood with his own father (pp. 28-29).

The scheme here of retracing a beginning at the end in an iterative exploration of meaning, the father re-traveling his childhood as he is dying, is also employed by

McCarthy in much of his work, and examples of these help to inform the instances of entering houses in *The Road* as parts of such an iteration.

According to Christopher Forbis, McCarthy used a palindrome layout for his novel *Blood Meridian*, and convincingly argues that this work functions in its entirety as a sort of palindrome of symbols. He asserts: “[S]uch mirror patterns, palindrome patterns, exist in remarkable number in *Blood Meridian*” (1). Forbis went so far as to number the pages in ascending order from back to front of the book in order that each page have a “mirror” page. He then details over sixty examples of these “mirror” pages (allowing for a two-page error) coinciding in content, such as “The Leonid meteors (3) are described as the story opens, and that ‘Stars were falling across the sky myriad and random’ on the man’s night in Fort Griffin (333)” (1). Forbis provides numerous and substantial evidence that McCarthy crafted his novel as a palindrome, beginning with the end and ending with the beginning.

All the Pretty Horses, the first installment in McCarthy’s Border Trilogy, also operates with a beginning-in-end motif, one Forbis may have successfully analyzed for specific palindrome details. The start of the novel opens with Grady Cole, the novel’s hero, attending his father’s funeral. Afterwards, Cole realizes “he has come to the end of something” (5). Ched Spellman says of this beginning that “[a]n experienced reader of American literature will recognize that coming to the ‘end of something’ often symbolizes coming simultaneously to the ‘beginning’ of a profoundly new experience” (167). And this “new experience” is embodied in Cole’s journey to the new frontier and country of Mexico.

Moreover, Spellman identifies coincidence in the novel's introduction and conclusion, not only in that each presents Grady Cole thinking of his father's death, but also in their specific details. At the beginning, Cole "turned south along the old war trail and he rode out to the crest of a low rise and dismounted and dropped the reins and walked out and stood like a man come to the end of something" (5). At the conclusion, after another funeral, Cole "rose and turned and looked off toward the north where the lights of the city hung over the desert. Then he walked out and picked up the reins and mounted his horse and rode up and caught the Blevins horse by its halter" (299). Though speaking more toward Cole's dreams, Spellman astutely identifies McCarthy's beginning-ending structure: "[a]t the beginning of McCarthy's narrative, Cole comes to the 'end of something,' and at the end of the narrative, he comes to the beginning of something, namely 'the world to come' " (5, 299). So, regardless of *All the Pretty Horses* matching a palindrome structure as fittingly as *Blood Meridian*, Spellman still reaffirms the importance of beginning/ending in McCarthy's work.

One of McCarthy's earlier novels, *Outer Dark*, not only reinforces beginning/ending, but also mirrors concepts that appear in *The Road*. It begins with an unholy triune of rugged men in its prologue, who travel only with necessities much like father and son in *The Road*. They stop at nightfall to build fires, which in ceremonious sacrilege they douse in the morning, their micturation coaxing "a foul white plume of smoke"(3) from the flames. Such obvious desecration of the fire symbol central to not only *The Road*, but to much of McCarthy's work, signals a perversion, a beginning extinguished by the excess of a sinister trio. As ominous as this prologue may be, the

proper start of the novel opens with an atmosphere comparable to the opening of *The Road*.

The phrase “She shook him awake from dark to dark” (5) from *Outer Dark* is echoed in *The Road*’s “he woke in the woods in the dark.... Nights dark beyond darkness” (3) and also suggests the idea of an ending, waking only to find more darkness. But the more explicit beginning/ending emerges from, Culla, the main character’s dream: “There was a prophet standing in the square with arms upheld in exhortation to the beggared multitude gathered there. A delegation who attended him with blind eyes upturned and puckered stumps and leprous sores” (*OD* 5). This is mirrored at the novel’s conclusion when Culla speaks with a blind man traveling the road who tells him: “I heard a preacher in town one time.... A healin preacher wanted to cure everybody and they took me up there. They was a bunch of us there all cripple folks” (241). In Culla’s dream he is seen to be unworthy of healing and blighted by the outraged crowd, while the old blind man continues down the road where it ends in a swamp. There is a prospect of healing and renewal at beginning and conclusion of *Outer Dark*, but the implication is that Culla is devoured by “that pit of hopeless dark” (6) while the blind man will conclude his journey in “a spectral waste... a landscape of the damned” (242). Though Culla has escaped that unholy triune, he encounters once again the dream he had at the novel’s start. So, these examples reveal a structure to which McCarthy returns with regularity, which are ultimately seen to express his understanding of human knowledge.

The Road, as McCarthy’s tenth novel, displays the same structure, but rather than begin and end with similar object or action in the physical realm, it begins and ends with

a dream. At the story's opening, the father wakes in that blasted landscape and recounts the dream:

In the dream from which he'd wakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand. Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls. Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast. Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease. Until they stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake. And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark. (3-4)

Then, near the conclusion and just prior to the father's death:

Drip of water. A fading light. Old dreams encroached upon the waking world. The dripping was in the cave. The light was a candle which the boy bore in a ringstick of beaten copper. The wax spattered on the stones. Tracks of unknown creatures in the mortified loess. In that cold corridor

they had reached the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them. (280)

The father's dream acts as a prophetic parable, an "Augury of Innocence" perhaps, one that elides him from his son's future, as indicated by "the point of no return," which is a symbolic representation of the world's situation: the father of pre-apocalypse dies and is succeeded by his son of post-apocalypse to whom he has passed the fire.

This returns to Daetema's and Zizek's discussion of the Real and fantasy (or imaginary), which is indebted to Lacan's work, and helps to construct a useful conceptual framework in which to place *The Road's* beginning/ending. The father and son exist in a world where social fantasies have disappeared. The former "real" pre-apocalyptic world lays before them, stripped bare, Real. These two dreams, unlike the father's other dreams and memories in the novel, are representative of a future to be, neither Real nor fantasy, which in Lacanian terms might be considered the "Ideal." "The important point is that this form [the Ideal] situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being... of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality" (Lacan 1). This basically breaks down into the conception of a future wholeness reached only "asymptotically" that is dependant upon a previous wholeness, which for Lacan was the infant's state in the womb prior to its recognition of self. Thus the placement of these dreams in caves can be representative of the womb/tomb conception of wholeness, beginning/ending in a dark, confined space.

McCarthy employs the disturbed Lester Ballard in *Child of God* to outwork womb/tomb, which approaches the concept of the father's dreams from a drastically different perspective. Near the end of the novel, Ballard has taken refuge in a cave:

In the night he heard hounds and called to them but the enormous echo of his voice in the cavern filled him with fear and he would not call again. He heard the mice scurry in the dark. Perhaps they'd nest in his skull, spawn their tiny bald and mewling whelps in the lobed caverns where his brain had been. His bones polished clean as eggshells, centipedes sleeping in their marrowed flutes, his ribs curling slender and whitely like a bone flower in the dark stone bowl. (189)

Jay Ellis writes of this passage that Ballard "has a particularly strong desire to create some form of home to replace the one he loses at the beginning of the book" (15). Ellis describes Ballard's Lacanian desire to return to the "womb" represented here by the family home, but this sanctuary for Ballard's deranged activity of hoarding female corpses also rouses his fear from its ominous echoe. Ellis concludes: "The cave provides an ironic means of escape for him, an unwitting movement to burial before death, rather than to the home he has tried to reclaim" (15). Ballard instead finds himself in a tomb, which ends up figured as womb by the narrator who announces for Ballard "He'd cause to wish and he did wish for some brute midwife to spald him from his rocky keep" (189). Once returned to the constraint of the womb and faced with its echoing eternity or permanence as tomb, Ballard wishes for a rebirth.

The problem with this womb/tomb scene for Ballard is that he has attempted to bring material with him to his supposed sanctuary. This attempt contradicts the derivation

of wholeness from the conception of the womb/tomb “Ideal” in that there is no recognition of self in either place. Once Lester has dragged the objects of dead females into this space, he must necessarily become self-aware, as Hendon argued objects to inform a sense of self. Lester becomes the subject and the dead bodies are the objects of his desire. He has attempted to bring fantasy into a realm that allows no room for such. Dianne Luce points out that “[N]ecrophilia shocks because of the practitioner’s failure to see that his beloved is mere material. Indeed the necrophile loves the corpse precisely because she is an illusion” (162). While the father’s cave dreams clearly represent the beginning/ending scheme McCarthy employs to strip the world bare for clarity, Lester Ballard’s cave is a place that he populates with desires that construct the precise illusion McCarthy seeks to dismantle.

Luce extends this cave metaphor to represent “Plato’s *Gorgias* myth, the myth of the day of judgment [where] only those souls who after death are judged capable of cure are subject to purification in ‘the prison-house of just retribution, which men call Tartarus’ and subsequent incarnation as humans (Stewart 134)” (Luce 158). The father enters the cave of Tartarus in his dream, and the indication at the novel’s conclusion is that he is, in a manner, reincarnated through his son: “If I’m not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I’ll talk to you. You’ll see” (*TR* 279). Ballard, however, enters a prison that damns rather than purifies, one that is imbued with depictions of his death.

The myth of *Gorgias*, specifically its cave of Tartarus, as well as Christopher Metress’ “*Via Negativa: The Way of Unknowing in Cormac McCarthy’s Outer Dark*,” get at the heart of beginning/ending, and provide the pivotal link between it and human

knowledge. While Metress is primarily concerned with a theological reading of *Outer Dark*, the implications of *via negativa* that he applies to the novel characterize the process of human knowing in *The Road* (if not the entire cannon of McCarthy). Metress draws his understanding of *via negativa* from the Syrian monk known as pseudo-Dionysius and informs his discussion with Frederick Copleston's reading of the theology. They show that *via negativa* to involve pursuing God by stripping "away from God [all] human modes of thought and inadequate conceptions of the Deity" (147). What this is meant to accomplish is "A Darkness of Unknowing... [wherein the mind] renounces all apprehension of the understanding" (148). Thus, "The best way to think about God is to think about what He is not, and if we do this, God becomes... 'a nothingness, a mystery, a darkness which [exists but] lies above our rational understanding' " (148). If the word "God" is substituted with the word "world" above, what emerges is an apt description of *The Road's* setting.

The father is forced to think of what the world is not: the fantasy or imaginary pre-apocalyptic social construction. Theodore Adorno argues in *Aesthetics and Politics* that "[e]ven the suggestion" of unknowing through the nothingness, mystery, and darkness displayed by Metress, "can become a moment of knowledge. This can happen where a gulf opens up between the overwhelming and unassimilable world of things, on the one hand, and a human experience impotently striving to gain a firm hold on it, in the other" (162-63). The father's world is not made up of Coke or states or coins, but of "things [that] were older than man and... hummed of mystery" (*TR* 287). Metress concludes, speaking of *Outer Dark*: "Instead of creating a work in which his characters take the *via negativa* toward understanding divine darkness, McCarthy has fashioned the

novel in such a way as to make *it* a kind of *via negativa*, a road down which we travel as readers as we learn to unlearn our assumptions” (149). And this is precisely the activity of *The Road*, the father, along with readers, travel *via negativa* to unlearn assumptions that are not indicative of what the world is. And to return to the symbol of the cave, Luce explains that “the wisdom achieved in Tartarus ... [involves] forgetfulness... or oblivion” (158), the place where the father dreams he has lost his life after traveling the road, *via negativa*, that has slowly stripped away the assumptions he had carried from the world of pre-apocalypse.

CHAPTER IV

DWELLINGS

1. INTRODUCTORY BUILDINGS

The Road's world, as detailed thus far, is one of post-apocalypse that serves as the mirror to the pre-apocalyptic world of the father's memory and former life. The houses/dwellings encountered in the novel, being the fundamental buildings/dwelling places of human kind, offer negatives of their pre-apocalyptic mirrors. Martin Heidegger, in his essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" analyzes the notion of "dwelling" and succinctly details a pre-apocalyptic notion of such. He argues that "[w]e attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building" (347), and as such "[d]welling and building are related as end and means" (348). Heidegger concludes that "[b]uilding as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings" (350). With such reasoning, the notion of a physical building comprised of raw material for dwelling is no longer sustainable in the world of father and son. Buildings have become tombs in *The Road*, places of death and decay, not spaces of cultivation. Rick Wallach argues that the literature of McCarthy shows "the things that once mattered to or encompassed the characters of his stories. Or, more precisely, he shows us these things in the process of being laid to waste" (Holloway xiii). A more pervasive depiction of such "laying to waste" than *The Road*'s is hardly imaginable, especially to the conception of dwelling/home.

The scenes in which dwellings are entered in *The Road* can be divided into two categories that relate to use versus misuse. These categories can be put simply as: (1) the houses that once were something and (2) the houses that have become something else

(i.e. represent misuse). These categories are, to a large degree, dependant upon the Heideggerian definition of dwelling as building. Since in the apocalyptic world it is not possible for a physical dwelling to entail the notion of building, the static occupation of a building as a dwelling place is a form of misuse, as exemplified by the cannibal house which is the only building used as a dwelling in the novel. The other dwelling that could be placed in this second category is the father's childhood home. It can be compared to the cannibal house in terms of the son's response to each situation, though the context is entirely different. Three dwellings that once were something are the fallout shelter, the plantation house, and the boat they find, *La Pajara de Esperanza*. The fallout shelter is the only dwelling that actually fulfills its intended use, while the plantation house and boat were at least dwellings that had been something.

McCarthy primes this exploration of dwellings with a brief scene, one that falls under the category of houses that used to be something, where the father enters a farmhouse alone. "He left the boy standing in the road holding the pistol while he climbed an old set of limestone steps and walked down the porch of the farmhouse shading his eyes and peering in the windows" (*TR* 21). In the context of a pre-apocalyptic world, this would appear to be criminal activity, vagrants on the verge of burglary. But in a world whose social structure has collapsed, so have the laws and understandings that would make the father and son's activity "illegal." In truth, it is the lack of such social contracts as "laws" that turn the father into the possible victim. What may stand between him and the objects in the house is now real threat rather than imagined complicity, a possible ambush condemned by no law or person.

The father operates in this scene through negative knowledge, stripping the notions binding the idea of social edifice to safe place. Jay Ellis makes the important distinction between place and space that shows how the father's approach is by way of negative knowledge: "I will employ the terms *place* in opposition to *space* to distinguish between constraints on character movement... and the void of the natural world without human construction. Briefly, a place is a construction of the possibilities of space into a fixed set of circumstances. Place is ontological, space existential" (17). The father's treatment of the building here shows that its set of circumstances has ruptured and holds a less fixed or stable definition. The situation of the world dictates that this building has shed certain social particulars and it therefore becomes less knowable to the father. If this scene had been in a pre-apocalyptic context, the father and his son would have simply walked up to the door, knocked, and asked for assistance. But without a constructed society to mantle a fixed set of circumstances for this building, Ellis' idea of construction as place shifts closer to space in *The Road*. The father must cast off the social understanding of "home" to realize the possibilities of danger that are now also included in this conception.

Following suit, the father "let himself in through the kitchen" rather than through the front door, only to be greeted by a field of objects further demonstrating the workings of negative knowledge. "China in a breakfront, cups hanging from their hooks.... There was an antique pumporgan... a television set. Cheap stuffed furniture together with an old handmade cherrywood chifferobe.... A child's room with a stuffed dog" (22). And after encountering all these things "He stripped back the beds and came away with two good woolen blankets" (22), nothing more. In a place rich with objects designed for

social functionality, the father finds the things necessary for survival in the absence of “home.” Objects’ use-value has shifted completely from social to survival, so understanding objects’ social functionality is less necessary. The only imperative remaining value for objects is their ability to aid father and son’s survival.

Another priming example of negative knowledge comes earlier when the two discover a gas station. They find the gas tank empty, and continue to search the service bay. “A standing metal toolbox against one wall. He went through the drawers but there was nothing there that he could use. Good half-inch drive sockets. A ratchet” (6). Interestingly, even tools lose their use-value. In a world where objects are dwindling, tools like wrenches that depend upon a specific socially produced mechanical design, are slowly deprived of the things on which they might work. It is intentional irony from McCarthy that the father looks in the trash to find the only material that they can use. “He dragged out the steel trashdrum and tipped it over and pawed out all the quart plastic oilbottles. Then they sat on the floor decanting them of their dregs one by one.... Oil for their little slutlamp” (7). In contrast to the wrench, the value of such a small amount of oil to pre-apocalypse society was not worth the time it took to obtain, while to the two it is priceless. So the trashdrum acts as an apt symbol of negative knowledge, a container of waste becoming a receptacle that will help “light the long gray dusks, the long gray dawns” (*TR* 7).

2. THE CHILDHOOD HOME

But beyond objects found that represent the stripping of knowledge, a specific building, the father’s childhood home, serves as a prime example of negative knowledge, as well as beginning/ending, as it returns attention to Wallach’s argument of “laying to

waste.” The travelers encounter this home early in the novel: “The peeling wood clapboards were largely gone from the lower walls for firewood leaving the studs and the insulation exposed. The rotted screening from the back porch lay on the concrete terrace” (*TR* 25). As Wallach noted, McCarthy has the father encounter the sacred place of his childhood as nothing more than a husk of what it once was. But interestingly, this frame of a house stripped bare, is still capable of reconstructing a rich and moving world in the father’s mind, a beginning in an end.

He stood there. He felt with his thumb in the painted wood of the mantle the pinholes from tacks that had held stockings forty years ago. This is where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy.... On cold winter nights when the electricity was out in a storm we would sit at the fire here, me and my sisters, doing our homework. The boy watched him. Watched shapes claiming him he could not see. (*TR* 26)

Along this road, this system of knowing, the father and son find a powerful material palindrome, representative of both past and future. Martin Buber helps explain the father’s relation to this sacred place:

Man can set at a distance without coming into real relation with what has been set at a distance. He can fill the act of setting at a distance with the will to relation, relation having been made possible only by that act; he can accomplish the act of relation in the acknowledgment of the fundamental actuality of the distance. (*The Knowledge of Man* 64)

Once in contact with the material of his childhood home, the father can acknowledge the distance of its actuality (the memories of his former life) to his present condition, and

therefore accomplish the act of relating to it (recalling these memories, the “shapes claiming him”). To the father this relation is a return to origins, while to the son the house is a palimpsest, a partially erased building overlain with the newly realized thoughts and memories of his father that he can only begin to conceive.

Jean Baudrillard, in his *System of Objects*, more concretely describes the father’s experience in encountering his childhood home:

Human beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collusion in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value – what might be called a ‘presence’. What gives the houses of our childhood such depth and resonance in memory is clearly [a] complex structure of interiority, and the objects within it serve for us as boundary markers of the symbolic configuration known as home. The caesura between inside and outside, and their formal opposition, which falls under the social sign of property and the psychological sign of the immanence of the family, make this traditional space into a closed transcendence. (14)

The “closed transcendence” that Baudrillard mentions, the way the father can simultaneously be distanced and in real relation to his home, operates on two spatial levels between the father and son. First, there is the obvious physical space closed off from the outside world. For the father this space is representative of permanence and security, while the son’s only experience of such space is fugitive and perilous. Second, there is the closed psychological space of memory that houses “the shapes claiming [the father]” that the son could not see. This is the ultimate divide between the two, this closed space of the father’s memory, a realm containing “[t]he names of things slowly following

those things into oblivion” (*TR* 88) a world “shorn of its referents and so of its reality” (*TR* 89).

Also relevant for this scene is Ellis’ observation that “In McCarthy novels generally, houses do not generally establish civilized places as much as they simply constrain character movement – or in some cases would do so, if they were stable enough. Character movement therefore reveals itself most obviously in flight from this particular form of constraint” (13-14). The son can see his father being claimed, or constrained, by the space of his home, and this arouses an anxiety in the boy who understands that their survival depends upon their flight along the road. The “shapes” claiming the father are those he must un-know, fantasies that provide no use for their current situation.

Bill Brown touches on Baudrillard’s hypothesis and a notion of unknowing by describing Mark Twain’s reaction to the loss of his estate. Twain was both repulsed by the pressures placed on him by the object-world of his house, and also infatuated with the “objects without number” making “the American house... the most satisfying refuge yet invented” (24). Brown surmises: “[c]learly those objects were for Twain objects of fascination and repulsion, modes of self-definition and self-obliteration, sources of safety and threat” (24). As it is for Brown, such interplay between physical loss and psychological revival plays a prominent role in *The Road*’s presentation of human knowledge. The father comes to realize that “each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins. As in a party game. Say the word and pass it on. So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not” (131). And so human knowledge is oddly enabled and perpetuated by loss itself.

Tammy Clewell examines similar themes of loss and renewal in her work *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism*. In it she argues that a postmodern treatment of mourning represents “the open-ended aspects of loss to promote new forms of identity and social change” (3). Whether McCarthy’s work can truly be considered “postmodern” remains a topic of debate, but regardless of this, Clewell’s observations are beneficial in understanding *The Road*, and are especially helpful in explaining the father’s encounter with his childhood home. Of particular relevance is Clewell’s adoption of Virginia Woolf’s term “invisible presences” that she employs to express “a duality in the modernist conception of loss, a conception that apprehends both the absolute disappearance of the object and the enduring personal traces and social legacies that loss manages to leave behind” (6). Certainly Woolf’s idea rings true with Baudrillard’s “presence,” and while it is *The Road* that offers the clearest, most comprehensive depiction of such a relationship, especially in this encounter with “home,” McCarthy’s oeuvre is essentially an outworking of the same. In fact, return to the physically eroded home is one common to McCarthy’s work.

In *Suttree*, McCarthy details a number of instances where the title character encounters similarly eroded childhood locals. The most striking of which is Suttree’s return to the grade school of his youth. “The floorboards creaked underfoot, small life scabbled away.... Through old classrooms, the dusty clutter of desks. On the blackboards scrawled obscenities. A derelict school for lechers.... This old bedroom in this old house where he’d been taught a sort of Christian witchcraft had two doors...(304). Certainly this initial depiction is one inverse to the father’s psychological reaction in *The Road*, but the effects of each local on their subjects of father and Suttree

possess a central similarity. The two encounter physical spaces that had drastically shaped something of who they had become, and they each take pains to return to these dilapidated places. Of particular pertinence is McCarthy's attention to the fireplaces in both school and childhood home.

Suttree "went to the fireplace where he lifted back the iron mask and on one knee reached up the chimney throat and took down a small billikin carved from some soft wood and detailed with a child's crayon" (304). In *The Road* "[t]hey walked through the diningroom where the firebrick in the hearth was as yellow as the day it was laid because his mother could not bear to see it blackened" (26). The fireplaces figure as symbols in the Gnostic undercurrent buttressing McCarthy's oeuvre, but more importantly, each depiction entails an idea of something preserved. In Suttree's case, a billiken, a kind of good luck charm, has been preserved, stowed away in the "throat" of the chimney, while the father notices that, after years of neglect, the fireplace of his parent's home remains as it has always been, "yellow as the day it was laid." The tempting analogy of "billikin" to yellow brick, likens good luck and that road leading to the Emerald City, but the central concern is that, as objects, these fireplaces house and preserve pasts that may be re-accessed through a physical return.

Not consequential is the fireplace's significance as a site of both destruction and rejuvenation, where life, or fire perpetuates a symbiotic relationship with ash and death. Ron Rash, also an Appalachian writer, lends credence to this observation in his description of Irish tradition³: "A family's hearth fire was never allowed to die down

³ McCarthy was quite familiar with Irish tradition, even going as far as changing his name to Cormac after an Irish king. See James Potts' "McCarthy, Mac Airt and mythology: Suttree and the Irish high king."

completely.... When children left to marry and raise their own families, they took fire from their parents' hearth with them. It was both heirloom and talisman, nurtured and protected because generations recognized it for what it was—living memory” (qtd. in Bennet 1). The father recognizes that he must also pass this living memory, “the fire,” as he tells his son in his last moments “You have to carry the fire” (*TR* 278). And as he had revealed earlier by way of internal monologue, each human is essentially a fireplace: “[a]ll things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes” (*TR* 54). A fireplace, containing both ash and fire, is representative not only of the much more general world at large but also of the role father plays as fuel; he becomes, after his death, living memory carried by his son.

This fireplace in *The Road* holds additional significance for this idea of birth in the ashes with its brief mention of color. There are two occurrences of the color yellow early in the novel that are tied to remembering a childhood event or local. The first is remembering “yellow leaves” (13) as the father recalls the day he and his uncle rowed across a lake to pull a stump for firewood. The second is in the father’s childhood home where he sees the yellow bricks in the hearth (26). The father appears to have two different responses in these scenes, wishing to leave his childhood home but recalling the day going for firewood to have been “the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape days upon” (13). The difference in these responses is rooted in the idea of beginning and end as they relate to fire.

The yellow leaves in the first scene are encountered through a childhood memory of potential, a prelude to the fire that will be the fruit of their labors. The yellow bricks in

the second scene are encountered in the reality of the father's adult life and show the location where fire had been and will be no more. The first memory captures the situation of the father and son, who perform something of the ritual of this memory every evening in collecting wood to make a fire. The day literally figures as a day to shape days upon. Inversely, the second instance recalls the site where fuel was burned or consumed rather than the location where it was collected, marking the terminus of this process.

Obviously the color yellow plays into the significance of each scene, especially since *The Road* is overwhelmingly monochromatic apart from descriptions of fire. Because color is so scarce, it is helpful to consider the meaning of yellow through a scheme Kandinsky developed from Götheian models in order to explain how colors interact and signify. Kandinsky based this system off of a polarity between yellow and blue. Yellow, he said, was an eccentric color that radiated its hue towards spectators. Blue was centripetal, drawing into itself away from spectators. Kandinsky described yellow as the physical, the movement of eternal resistance and possibility (birth) while blue represented the spiritual, the complete lack of resistance and no possibility (death) (Gage 194). The implication for these scenes is that they represent physical possibility and impossibility, beginning and end for father.

Additional importance of this color is found in the objects that are described as being yellow. The leaves early in the novel are the only objects that are not manmade. The others include a yellow toy truck (34), rain boots and breeches (226-27), an EPIRB (emergency position-indicating radio beacon) (240), and a gray and yellow ski parka (281). The leaves, being the only "organic" object and ironically the only absent one, suggest the disappearance of physical potential, which aligns with the state of the world.

However, the final occurrence of the color is in the description of the man's parka who finds the boy at the end of the novel, which would seem to raise questions about the demise of physical potential. The employment of the color yellow here can at least be taken as a beginning-in-end as it relates to the boy's renewed potential in life in the care of this new social unit.

With returns even in color, it appears that Forbis' assertion about McCarthy's structural palindrome format can extend beyond format, and even proposes that the characters' ontological foundation depends on similar returns, the loci of bygone years refiguring the "shapes" of what was onto what is. Consequently, the father employs the road with the hopes of generating for his son such a primal ontological anchor, and he thinks "[w]here you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (*TR* 74), which is nothing short of the journey the two undertake.

This intricate process of "anchoring" or at least accessing essentials of the past through childhood locals is also found at the conclusion of McCarthy's *The Orchard Keeper*. In it, something of a synthesis of Suttree's repudiation of the past and the father's attempt to re-access the same occurs. A scene much similar to the one Suttree encounters is set for Rattner as he returns to his home: "Old dry leaves rattled frail and withered as old voices" (244) while he reflects that the decayed house "was never his house anyway" (244). The leaves are likened to "parchments on which no message at all appeared" (244), and in visiting his mother's grave site, Rattner pats the tombstone "as if perhaps to conjure up some image, evoke again some allegiance with a name, a place, hallucinated recollections in which faces merged inextricably, and yet true and fixed" (245). This odd

sophistication of “no message” and “conjuring” an image from such a blank parchment gets to the heart of both Suttree’s ambivalence and the father’s nostalgia.

The idea of “true and fixed” that Rattner’s narrator introduces, is one that Suttree wishes to extricate himself from, a past of “Christian-witchcraft” that his old school recalls. But such is “true and fixed,” a necessary reference or anchor that enables Suttree’s understanding of the life and world in which he has chosen to reside. Inversely, the father’s nostalgia arouses something like guilt when his son asks: “Papa, can we go?... I’m really scared.” And the father responds: “It’s alright, we shouldn’t have come” (*TR* 27). The desires to discard and recall are the same in that neither can be actualized for either character. The mode of knowing, or understanding in which Suttree and father operate is simultaneously “true and fixed” and also confined to “closed transcendence.”

Common to these three scenes of return where dwellings conjure memories of childhood, is ultimately the idea of renewal. Robert L. Jarrett points out in his work *Cormac McCarthy*, that the author’s move from the Appalachian setting of his first five novels to the expansive western setting of *Blood Meridian* “is associated with psychological rebirth or renewal” (64). Jarrett gives examples of such “rebirth” in the characters of Rattner and Suttree. Rattner departs the cemetery at the conclusion of *The Orchard Keeper* and heads “out to the western road” having “turned his back on his home, his past, and the Southern Appalachias, Rattner implicitly sets out on the road to make a new beginning for himself” (63). Jarrett views Suttree’s departure from Knoxville in a similar light: “the concluding passage of *Suttree* seemingly would represent another escape to the West” (63-4). The father, too, must relinquish the old life and memories summoned by his childhood home in order to set out on the road to make a new

beginning for him and his son, and this form of renewal relates to negative knowledge, stripping down what is not absolutely essential in order to understand and survive in the world at hand. Thus the character of the father is faced with a more complex situation.

As McCarthy's fiction moved westward from Appalachia and then back with *The Road*, similarly the father moves from pre-apocalypse to post, and must retrace steps in the wreckage. So while *The Road* overlays something of *Blood Meridian's* desert upon Appalachia, as Graulund pointed out, the father passes the essential sparks from his dead life to the child in order to explain what a beginning looks like. Only then can they strike out on their own journey that will end in a refigured renewal, which is ultimately indicated by the boy agreeing to carry the fire after his father dies in spite of his protest: "I don't know how to" (278).

Jerome Loving describes the idea of renewal as "the central experience in American literature in the nineteenth century (if not also in the twentieth)" and says that it "is essentially the puritanical desire for the prelapsarian - that second chance of coming into experience anew" (ix). Considering the father to be a frontiersman with nothing left but frontier itself is something that can be identified with Jarrett's understanding of the male heroes of McCarthy's Western works:

Western man is 'dispossessed' from an Edenic state within the self....

What is 'divested' from these American male heroes are the husks of their past - familial, cultural, geographic - that surround and confine the innermost self. Purged of the historical past, this self is reborn in the Western wilderness, apparently purified...." (65)

In a sense, the father is “reborn” in a “Western wilderness” of sorts, and he must confront, through the husk of his childhood home, that the seemingly Edenic realm of his past has been divested from him. Rather than tautological reminiscing, the father must invest himself in the new Eden of his son by refiguring an idea of childhood to provide for his son the same essential ontological anchor that he had been forced to raise. The father’s task then, is to perpetuate in a world of ash that which succumbed to a world of plenty.

Clewell would identify this task with the act of mourning. She summarizes a Freudian understanding of such to support her theory:

The work of mourning... entails a kind of hyper-remembering, a period of obsessive recollection during which the mourner magically resuscitates the existence of the lost object in the space of the psyche.... Mourning, as *The Ego and the Id* lays out, depends on creating a figure for the lost object and taking this figure into the structure of one’s own identity in ways that constitute, decenter, and transform the psyche. (12)

The father’s contact with his childhood home reveals this process, and helps in understanding the religious duty the father feels towards his son. The “figure” the father creates for his loss is his son: “He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). His son becomes a “Golden chalice, good to house a god” (*TR 75, Italics mine*). Thus the only true “dwelling” to be found in *The Road* is the son himself.

To return to Heidegger’s definition that “[b]uilding as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings” (350), it

becomes clear that the only thing capable of being described as “building” in *The Road* is the son in whom the father “cultivates growing things,” or in the language of the book, the fire. John Cant describes this fire as that which “signifies the vitality that burns within the ardent hart, the mystery that is the spark of life itself... that needs no reason to exist” (271). What enables the boy to carry this spark and, as the father describes him, to be “the best guy” (*TR* 279), returns to the concept of negative knowledge. There is no reason, at least not in pre-apocalyptic terms, for the boy to care to exist. There is nothing of the world, no material or ideology, that keeps him moored to it or to life. It has all been stripped away, and in this sense the boy is pure. He is the fresh soil for renewal, the “chalice” carrying the most basic element of humanity that can at least be seen in the boy if not, as a hopeful reading might indicate, actually erect “buildings” anew.

3. THE CANNIBAL HOUSE

The son’s desire for such “erecting” is clearly seen throughout the novel as he urges his father to share their food with the blind and falsely named Ely, and beseeches him to spare a thieving roadagent’s life. Such building or erecting must return to the actual buildings described and what they indicate about object use, and therefore Cant’s idea of “the spark of life itself.” As mention earlier, when the father and son come across the cannibals’ house, they are in a dire situation: “They’d no food and little sleep in five days, and in this condition on the outskirts of a small town they came upon a once grand house sited on a rise above the road” (105). The father’s idea for survival is to seek provisions from this “once grand” structure: “I think we should check it out” (105). The son, however, protests: “Papa let’s not go up there... I don’t think we should go up there” (106). As noted before, the father, in this desperate state, returns to his pre-apocalyptic

lexicon, which tells him that the stuff for survival will be in the house. He disregards that “the windows were oddly intact,” and that they are probably being tracked: “If they see our tracks. Will they know what we are?... They’ll figure it out, he said” (104). Given the circumstances, the son is able to see clearly that caution should be used and this is a place to be avoided. The intact windows would indicate the house to be inhabited, and to maintain a static residence would necessitate a source of nutrition, which could only be provided by the human traffic following the road. But the father sees the building to be as narrated: a grand house.

As the two approach, McCarthy invests an uncharacteristic amount of detail (for *The Road* at least) in describing the façade. There is “macadam” leading up to it, and it is depicted as “tall and stately with white Doric columns across the front. A port cochere at the side” (105). This information serves to distance the father from the actual circumstance, and the opposite of negative knowing occurs. The father reads the Doric columns and port cochere as material that indicates opulence from the former world, so his reasoning is that the building must house something of this former wealth that will aid them in their desperate situation. To the son, the décor of the house is without meaning, and he can see the situation stripped bare of social implication. The house is nothing more than probably inhabited, and the son knows that they are in no state to confront dangerous people.

Further detail includes a “tall hedge of dead privet. An ancient birdsnest lodged in the dark wicker of it.... The handmade brick of the house kilned out of the dirt it stood on.... buckled soffits. A lamp that hung from a long chain overhead” (106). The specificity of language such as “macadam,” “Doric,” and “port cochere” earlier as well as

“privet” and “soffits” here indicates a former social intricacy concerned with details extending even to the type of plant selected to hedge the building. The description continues when they enter the building. The door

swung slowly in on its great *brass* hinges.... They stepped into a broad foyer floored in a *domino* of black and white *marble tiles*. A broad staircase ascending. *Fine Morris paper* on the walls.... The plaster ceiling *bellied in great swags* and the *yellowed dentil* molding was *bowed and sprung* from the upper walls.... A large *walnut buffet*.... A great hall of a room with ceilings twice the height of the doors. A fireplace with *raw brick* showing where the *wooden mantle* and surround had been pried away and burned. (107 *Italics mine*)

This mantle, having “been pried away and burned,” is the first indication of apocalyptic use-value. Neither the aesthetic nor historic properties of the mantle warrant its preservation when it is something that can be used as fuel.

The same was seen in the father’s childhood home: “The peeling wooden clapboards were largely gone... for firewood” (25), and is doubtlessly the norm for any house in that landscape. Such stripped houses serve as symbols of negative knowledge, the layers that are essential to human survival are peeled away and used. The rest is left to molder and be forgotten. What the inhabitants of this grand house have thus far shown to be essential is heat. The windows remain intact to withhold heat, and the mantle has been burned to produce it.

The second thing that this house indicates to be essential is food, though a thorough reading of the house’s system of objects would be needed. The first constructed

object that the two come across in the house is a “cord that came through the window [that] was tied to a brass bell and the bell was fixed in a rough wooden jig that had been nailed to the window molding” (108). What the father eventually comes to realize is that this is a sort of sinister dinner bell: “Coming through the canebrake into the road he’d seen a box. A thing like a child’s playhouse. He realized it was where they lay watching the road. Lying in wait and ringing the bell in the house for their companions to come” (115).

This grand house, full of anachronistic décor, appears to represent an ironic analogue of its pre-apocalyptic self. All objects constructed by its inhabitants serve as tools that aid in the consumption of other humans. The crude bell, the lock of steel plates, and the human deer stand are three. The one yet to be mentioned consisted of

an old iron harrow propped up on piers of stacked brick and someone had wedged between the rails of it a forty gallon castiron cauldron of the kind once used for rendering hogs. Underneath were the ashes of a fire and blackened billets of wood. Off to one side a small wagon with rubber tires.
(109)

These constructions appear to be antipodal to such things as a port cochere and Doric columns, yet McCarthy indicates that the two are equivalent in terms of consumption.

The most notable detail that supports this, “Fine Morris paper,” is one of only a handful of proper names in the novel, and this one is described as “waterstained and sagging.” McCarthy specifically mentions the designer William Morris, who was not only a prolific designer, but also a prolific writer, to oddly compare the pre and post-apocalyptic objects of this scene. Morris writes in a piece titled “The Lesser Arts:”

“Everything made by man’s hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly; beautiful if it is in accord with Nature and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with nature and thwarts her” (qtd. in Plotz 932). It could be argued that the “black and white marble tiles” and the “dentil molding” represent the beautiful, while the cannibalistic constructions represent the ugly, but John Plotz points out a line from Morris’ *News from Nowhere* to show that Morris believed “the best art cultivates an ‘intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth’ ” (932). It would be difficult to say what exactly “best art” is according to this, but Doric columns would not seem to be things that would arouse such ardor in an apocalypse.

But ardor aside, in the world of *The Road* it would be difficult for anything to generate such feelings for an earth whose very surface and skin have crumbled. In fact, in putting it like this, Morris is essentially stating that beauty is nature. For McCarthy, constructing a port cochere is less an aid to nature than it is an aid to the house, as are Doric columns, black and white tiles, and Morris paper. Rather than generating an ardor for the “skin and surface of the earth,” these objects create ardor for the system that they fashion. The house thus becomes the locus perpetuating consumption. In the pre-apocalyptic world, it was a consumption of objects. In the post-apocalyptic world where a nature from which objects were derived has disappeared, it is the humans, the constructors themselves, that are consumed as the last bits of nature.

The further irony indicated by referencing Morris is the artist’s work, *News from Nowhere*, his utopian novel that details a future at once similar to, and very different from *The Road*. Morris paints a future more primitive than the time in which he lived. Much of what would have been considered essential technological and social structure has been

removed and replaced with the pastoral existence of man in communion with nature and himself. Obviously, *The Road* presents a more primitive earth, but not one in which man and nature are anywhere near accord. Such a Utopic vision contained within this dichotomous building packs the notions of use value, beginning-in-ending, and negative knowledge into one bundle.

The proper use of negative knowledge seems to have been employed by society in *News from Nowhere* to create a new beginning. This people identified what was not essential in their modern world and disassembled it. Factories, buildings, bridges, etc., were done away with, and by this elimination, man was no longer distancing itself from nature/material. They disassembled things and consequently these things' histories that had come to stand in the way of a true understanding of material/nature to return their culture to a beginning of sorts. It is ambiguous in *The Road* as to how exactly the apocalyptic catastrophe occurred, but the resulting primal environment left to man disabled rather than enabled an interaction with material/nature. Through a misuse of negative knowledge in the aftermath, man was further removed from even himself as it lead to the canceling act of self-consumption, man being the only piece of nature remaining.

The ironic contrast of a house full of objects intended to capture and consume humans with the reference to William Morris and his fictional harmonious society serves to demarcate use and misuse as actions aimed at beginning or end. The society in *News from Nowhere* employs negative knowledge to strip away the unnecessary things humanity had constructed to re-arrive at a sort of Eden. Thus negative knowledge is used to return to a beginning of potential. In *The Road* the gang of the cannibal house strips

away the intended use of things to refigure them as new objects that aid in eliminating man himself. Hence, when the father breaks the lock to the trapdoor, a negatively refigured object, the chthonian is released in that horrific scene of partially eaten and dismembered humans. If the apocalyptic event of the novel is read as a nuclear holocaust, this scene would symbolize the start of that hideous ending brought on by the ultimate negatively refigured object, its destruction quite literally dismembering society itself. Consequently, misuse also employs negative knowledge, but terminates potential.

4. THE FALLOUT SHELTER, THE PLANTATION HOUSE AND THE SAILBOAT

A dwelling, as previously defined by Heidegger, necessarily entails potential. With use/misuse, beginning/ending, and negative knowledge in mind, a productive way to read these final three dwelling scenes is to examine how each figures into this scheme in terms of potential. Obviously, as stated earlier, the physical act of dwelling no longer holds potential, but the system of objects within these dwellings offers potential extensions to the lives of father and son depending on how they understand and use the material they find. But while these buildings offer potential of a kind, the road itself becomes gradually less capable of bringing the two into contact with dwellings. So the potential of understanding these pre-apocalyptic constructions fades in conjunction with the father's life.

The first pertinent detail to consider is how the two discovered each dwelling. The fallout shelter was just off the road, but had to literally be unearthed by the father: "He returned with a garden spade and. . . chucked the blade into the ground. It sank to half its length and stopped with a hollow wooden sound. He began to shovel away the dirt"

(134). Discovering the plantation house took a similar amount of effort: “In the leaden evening he stood leaning with his elbows on the cart handle and looking across the fields at a house perhaps a mile away. It was the boy who had seen it. Shifting in and out of the curtain of soot like a house in some uncertain dream.... It would cost them some effort to get there” (202). But the most effort came in their discovery of the sailboat, which the road did not even lead them to find. “They trekked out along the crescent sweep of the beach.... At the tide line a woven mat of weeds and the ribs of fishes in their millions... like an isocline of death. One vast sepulcher. Senseless. Senseless” (222). It is off the road in the midst of such devastation that they find the boat: “From the end of the spit to the boat there was perhaps a hundred feet of open water.... He waded naked into the water.... Then he trudged out splashing and dove headlong” (222-23).

The possibility of even reaching dwellings is seen to become increasingly more difficult, and this coincides with the father’s orientation. When the two discover the fallout shelter, they had just left the mountains, an area the father seems to have known well as his memories suggest he had frequented many of the spots along the road as a boy. But he had begun to lose his bearings a few pages earlier: “They studied the pieces of map, but he’d little notion of where they were” (126). This “little notion” dwindles to: “It was no country that he knew. The names of the towns or the rivers” (202), by the time they find the plantation house, and it is the son who sees it. Then, when the two come across the sailboat, even the idea of knowing disintegrates to “senseless,” as the two are off the road and the father’s geographic lexicon is rendered useless at the edge of a featureless ocean. Thus, the potential of knowing from “little notion” to “senseless” is revealed in part through the increasing difficulty to reach dwellings.

The objects that the two find and use before entering shelter and plantation house are also indicative of the potential of knowing. The discovery of the shelter's door first required the father's pre-apocalyptic understanding, which allowed him to accurately read an anomaly in nature; he felt hollowness in the ground, and concluded man had hidden something there. Then, prior to entering the fallout shelter, the father constructs a lamp out of a beer bottle filled with gasoline and oil, a rag acting as its wick. Because of its similarity to the trapdoor in the cannibal house, the father must convince his son that they have no other choice but to open the door of the shelter. "This door looks like the other door, he said. But it's not. I know you're scared. That's okay. I think there may be things in there and we have to take a look. There's no place else to go" (137). Then the father gives his son the symbolic choice of holding the lamp or the pistol while he breaks the lock on the door. "I'll hold the lamp," (137) he says, opting for the item whose use value aims at potential, lighting darkness to make action possible.

McCarthy makes a similar use value distinction when the two are crossing a plowed field to the plantation house. Again, the father uses his knowledge of the pre-apocalyptic world in combination with nature: "The field had been turned a last time.... It had rained recently and the earth was soft underfoot and he kept his eye on the ground and before long he stopped and picked up an arrowhead" (203). The recent "turning" of the field for planting season in combination with recent rain is read precisely by the father, and he discovers the object he believed he would find. "There are more, he said. Watch the ground, you'll see. He found two more" (203).

Shortly after this "he found a coin.... The lettering was in spanish" (204). The father finds the arrowhead worth mentioning to his son, an object intended for use. But

after he found the coin “he started to call the boy... and then he looked about at the gray country and the gray sky and he dropped the coin and hurried on to catch up” (204). Here, favor is given to the object representing physical use value, while the coin only represents an abstract value meant to be exchanged for another object or action. The father, looking around at what has become of the earth, and assuming that the two are indeed encountering a nuclear winter, he is reminded where such abstraction has lead, and drops the coin. But while this distinction is made here, the father is later given an ironic reminder of the intended use of arrowheads when he is shot by one in the leg (263). Consequently, the choice or distinction between arrowhead and coin holds less potential than the choice the son had between the pistol and the lamp. The sailboat’s representation of potential rests in its half-submerged state – it is the dwelling in the novel least capable of fulfilling its pre-apocalyptic function.

Upon entering these dwellings, there are essentially three uses the two find for the objects therein: sustenance, intended use, and refigured use. Certainly the primary reason that the two enter and search dwellings is for food, the logic being that in order for a place to have once been a dwelling, there must have been edibles, and there may still be. As for intended use, things like a spoon and blankets are taken and used by the two as they were intended to be used – to eat with and to keep warm. Refigured use necessitates the father’s knowledge of the objects’ intended use and also an understanding of the apocalyptic world so he would understand how to bend purpose to fit an apocalyptic function, such as his use of the flare gun to kill rather than signal.

The fallout shelter is the most functional dwelling in the novel in that it had not yet been used for its intended purpose, and the scene acts as a centerpiece of knowing

along the road. There are a multitude of things worth mentioning in this scene, but three take precedence over the others. The first is the appearance of Coca Cola for the second and last time in the novel. The second is the whiskey found in the shelter, which is intentionally specified as “bonded.” The third is the father’s waking dream of “creatures of a kind he’d never seen before” (153).

The mention of Coca Cola here hearkens back to an important observation that the son makes when the father discourages his son’s attempt to share the beverage with him: “It’s because I won’t ever get to drink another one, isn’t it?” The father replies: “Ever is a long time,” in a simple effort to teach the boy to keep hope. In the shelter, the two “drank Coca Cola out of plastic mugs” (148) while playing checkers. The father’s early lesson to keep hope ends fruitfully, a simple representation of the hope the father had to keep in order to find the fallout shelter in the first place. Thus the potential offered by Coca Cola in the shelter may be the most important, in that it fulfilled the father’s vague prophecy of “ever is a long time.”

The other drink found in the shelter is also indicative of knowing and potential. “He’d found four quarts of bonded whiskey still in the paper bags in which they’d been purchased and he drank a little.... It made him dizzy before he’d even finished it and he drank no more” (152). The significance of the whiskey specified as “bonded” is that the term refers to liquor housed in a state facility, supposedly to ensure buyers that the substance they purchased was in fact what it was billed to be. The fact that the father becomes dizzy off of the drink validates that it was in fact whiskey, thus implying that a function of the abstract pre-apocalyptic conception of “state” had left a concrete product to last in largely destroyed world. The potential that this scene speaks toward is that of

the capability of man's structure. As with the lasting roads, the whiskey was a result of a socially formed structure, powerful enough to generate things that would outlast itself, and even nature, like the dam the two see early in the novel: "Will the dam be there for a long time? I think so. It's made out of concrete. It will probably be there for hundreds of years. Thousands, even. Do you think there's fish in the lake? There's nothing in the lake." (20). Thus any proper use of this structure holds great potential, but it seems that such dwellings as the fallout shelter indicate an innate fear of the misuse of the same.

Because the world of the road reflects the very probable misuse of this structure, the fallout shelter houses "[t]he richness of a vanished world" and the son has trouble making sense of the things he sees there: "Why is this here? the boy said. Is it real?" (139). A dream the father later has in the shelter explains the son's disbelief. "He'd been visited in a dream by creatures of a kind he'd never seen before.... He turned and looked at the boy. Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed" (154). The father explicitly realizes for the first time that the world he inhabits is not the one he understood as his own.

The result is that he finally grasps "[t]hat he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own" (154). The mode of knowing that the son operated through had never entailed hope in a future since he understood sustenance as differed to the leftovers "of a vanished world." Therefore this scene represents a central concern of the novel in its depiction of negative knowledge. It is a backward understanding that basically explains potential to reside, for the son, in what is not known, and the father puts it best in some of his final words: "You need to go on, he said.... You need to keep

going. You *dont know* what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You'll be lucky again. You'll see. Just go. It's all right" (278 *Italics mine*).

This supposed luck is what brings them into contact with the plantation house, which operates as a palindrome of the cannibal house. There is a "gravel drive" (204) leading up to it, just like the gravel drive that lead up to the grand house (105), and there is a "columned portico" and "brick loggia" (204) similar to the Doric columns and port cochere of the earlier house. Upon entering, there was a "High ceiling" (205) like the "ceilings twice the height of the doors" (107) in its replica, as well as stairs that immediately greet the two upon entry. The divergence occurs in mention of the pantry and the fireplace. In the plantation house pantry the two find "several dozen quart jars" (206) of various vegetables, while in the pantry of the grand house the two find the trap door. Also, the fireplace lintel of the plantation house is still intact, unlike the grand house's mantle used for fuel.

The difference in the midst of such similarity is the idea of preservation versus consumption. The plantation house represents a true anachronism, its furniture "shrouded in sheeting. Pale squares on the walls where paintings once had hung. In the room on the other side of the foyer stood a grand piano" (206). All of this is a scene of the past world preserved, used for nothing until father and son stumble across this decadence foreign to their travels. The father lights candles, and the two "ate slowly out of bone china bowls.... The pistol lying to hand like another dining implement. The warming house creaked and groaned. Like a thing being called out of long hibernation" (209). Thus, the intended use of the house and its system of objects is conjured from the past by the duo, as they refuse to use furniture as firewood, opting instead to carry "armloads of dead

limbs up the back stairs through the kitchen and into the dining room” (207). This action and the pistol that rests “at hand” signify a protection of the past in this scene that replaces the repudiation that was prevalent in the cannibal house. The two interact with the things they find in the house as they had been intended, the use potential still capable to aid father and son. They end up taking a wheelbarrow “new blankets and the jars of canned goods.... He’d found a pair of workshoes and the boy was wearing blue tennis shoes with rags stuffed into the toes and they had fresh sheeting for face masks” (213). The use of rags and sheets may be slightly altered, but their use is intended for preservation and not consumption.

The sailboat, while presenting a rich offering of usable things, also acts as a vague palindrome to the father’s childhood home, consequently carrying with it similar notions of preservation and potential. One connection is the more general notion of the ocean as the origin of life. Thus the father’s particular origin of life in his childhood home is related to that dwelling half sunk in the universal source of humanity. Another general detail that equates childhood home to sailboat is the son’s absence. While the son enters his father’s home early in the novel, he cannot go where his father is taken by “shapes claiming him he could not see” (26). Similarly, the son is physically disconnected from the father in this scene as the father swims to the boat alone, and this is the only dwelling the two do not enter together. And more pertinent is the fact that this is the only dwelling the boy has a desire to enter. The reason for his desire here is the same as the boy’s insistence that they leave the father’s home: “We should go, Papa. Can we go?”(27). The boy’s anxiety lies in his recognition of the father’s abstraction. As Graulund pointed out earlier, such memory presents “a dangerous distraction from the one thing that truly

matters: the present survival of his boy” (66), and the boy’s anxiety is similar in the scene of the sailboat as he fears more the loss of his father to those “things claiming him” than of his father’s physical protection. The father’s potential for preserving the two rests in his knowledge of the world of before that allows him to read how things can be used in the world of the present, not the converse of reading things in the present only to lose himself in the past.

But beyond origins and the father’s inaccessibility, there are two objects that explicitly link the sailboat to childhood home. As discussed previously, the color yellow is mentioned only a handful of times in *The Road*, and the father encounters the yellow bricks of his home and then discovers a “yellow plastic EPIRB” (240). The connection that this “emergency position-indicating radio beacon” has with the yellow of the fireplace is in its function of indicating position. To the father, the fireplace expressed his historical position in terms of origins, but the object can help no one other than the father to locate himself. Similarly, the EPIRB, as dependant upon an operative social maritime structure, can no longer perform its function as distress beacon – there would be no one to acknowledge the position, and if there was the attention would probably be unwanted.

An even stronger symbol of positioning is found by the father on the sailboat in the form of a brass sextant:

The last thing that he found was a square oak box with dovetailed corners and a brass plate let into the lid. He thought it might be a humidior but it was the wrong shape and when he picked it up and felt the weight of it he knew what it was. He unsnapped the corroding latches and opened it. Inside was a brass sextant, possibly a hundred years old.... The brass was

dull and there were patches of green on it that took the form of another hand that once had held it but otherwise it was perfect. It was the first thing he'd seen in a long time that stirred him. He held it in his hand and then he fitted it back into the blue baize lining of the case and closed the lid. (227-28)

The great care given to detail and the fact that the object actually moved the father emotionally indicate several levels of significance, two of which offer specific ideas that further this discussion. The first and most obvious is that the object is no longer of use in the absence of any astronomical aides. The father's realization is that the capability of man to position himself, on even the most basic geographical level, has forever disappeared. As with the map they had used to reach the ocean, any former mode of abstract positioning is deteriorating along with the concrete world upon which such positioning had depended.

The second is the sextant's historical resonance. The description of "green patches" where "another hand" had once held it is a physical representation of its former capability. It must have seen a degree of use for it to show such wear. Also, the care McCarthy takes to note that the tool was from the Hezzaninth company in London further imbues the object with historic value for the manufacturer renowned for its sextants, and serves to put more distance between the father and the world he once inhabited.

The final, and perhaps most conclusive indication, is the brief flash of color in the scene. If this were to be read according to Kandinsky's color scheme discussed earlier, the father replacing the sextant into its "blue baize" case would indicate that he was putting the sextant into its tomb of no possibility and death. When read according to this

color scheme, the end at beginning, the death of navigation at the origin of life, it is a conclusive statement on the mode of human knowing. It is a death of the old, and a birth of the new, some unknowable form to the father that the son will enact as he carries the fire along the road.

Chapter V

Conclusion: Refiguring Knowledge – The Promise

In the final paragraph of *The Road*, a cryptic yet beautiful description of beginning/end has become the topic of much debate:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (TR 287)

The either/or nature of the argument on this passage is similar to the general understanding of the novel as it relates to meaning, here in the form of hope. Kunsu argues:

In *The Road*, McCarthy has granted us this new Prometheus, a twenty-first-century good guy, Adam reinvented: the child is carrying the fire of hope and righteousness from the old story toward the new one.... And what we have in the novel's style is the post-apocalyptic language of a simultaneously new and age-old work: a means of looking forward, to after, by seeking the basic forms again. (69)

Warde, too, reads hope from this scene (135) as he equates the sensual richness of it to counter the dwindling detail of sensual experience in the book and points towards a future

again capable of such experience, and Datema interprets the trout in the conclusion to represent an altered, but still hopeful, symbol of the Christian fish (152).

But all conceptions of the passage do not align with hope. Graulund is more skeptical as to the novel providing a definitive answer:

As the man at one point ponders the solitary flute-playing of his son, so are we as readers left to wonder whether such optimism of a new beginning represents: ‘A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin’ (McCarthy 2007, 81). Insofar as the unexpected ending could be constructed as divine intervention and proof of God’s will on earth, or, failing that, that the goodness of the boy constitutes a law unto itself that will form a new divinity, we are, at the very end, left wondering, as uncertain as ever” (76).

A similarly skeptical tone is taken by Rambo as she claims: “[McCarthy’s] final paragraph suggests that this world, whose ‘becoming’ was once mapped on the backs of brook trout, cannot be repaired” (106), as she opts instead for a reading that refigures human understanding as it relates to the idea of hope or redemption. Carlson sees the novel similarly, asserting: “The construction or creation and the loss – both in and of this work – are co-implicated” (59) as he reminds readers of the father’s fulfilled promise that he will not send the son into darkness alone (65), a reading that again refigures hope. As such, a useful approach is offered by the beginning/ending scheme outlined by father and son on the grounds of the refigured knowledge that they represent.

The father, in his necessary pragmatism, must carefully sort “what to take from what to leave” (230) on the grounds of now versus then, the objects much like his life:

“he thought about his life but there was no life to think about” (137). Thus, as the father nears the ultimate palindrome of beginning, what he knows are empty thing-values, each being subtracted as they once had been added. The idea of knowing inferred by the concluding passage as a beginning-in-ending is more in-tune with a refiguring rather than a renewal of this human capability. Jaques Derrida gets at the core of this subtraction or negative knowing by discussing the inverse of such a process:

To invent, and most particularly understanding invention as an event, means here to rediscover what was there without being there, both in language and in philosophy; it is a question of finding, yes, but of finding for the first time what was always there and what had always been there, to find again. [...] Such words, which seemed lost, hidden away in language, almost asleep in language, but asleep with one eye open, here they appear leaping into the center of the stage, organizing and playing a lively and vigilant role. (qtd. in Malabou, *Again* xvi-xvii)

“[F]inding for the first time what was always there” is the aim of McCarthy in *The Road*. But his understanding of “maps and mazes,” the structures produced from “what was always there,” are the abstractions that must be refigured.

Catharine Malabou explains that “To cause to return is not to repeat; it is not to mimic; it is not to reproduce.... On the contrary, one must consider the manner in which they can rebound after their double adhesion to tradition and deconstruction” (*Again* 28). This double adhesion is precisely the performance of the father as he leads his son on the road. He must simultaneously adhere to the tradition and deconstruction of his world in order to know how to survive. It is the son’s task to “rebound” through invention,

refiguring, after the father's death, the knowledge that had been left him. "I'll talk to you every day" the boy whispered at the side of his dead father. "And I won't forget. No matter what. Then he rose and turned and walked back out to the road" (286). Thus, the father, the source of the son's understanding, is equated with the "thing which could not be put back," and the son responds by creating a structure of his own in the form of a promise, and he returns to the road where "he did talk to him and he didnt forget" (286).

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